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Postmodern Blackness and the Legacy of Bessie Smith

Phillip Warfield

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The century after the American Civil War proved to be calamitous for African Americans in the South, paving the way for movements such as the Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance. Although no longer enslaved, many African Americans struggled to earn a comfortable living due to institutional racism. Black entertainers, authors, and other artists struggled to find their identity in an America that did not welcome their musical styles, unique lifestyles, newfound sexual freedom, and increasing success. This paper aims to analyze and focus on the average life of mostly female African American entertainers before and after the Civil Rights era, while also showcasing the life and legacy of one of the first African American women to gain nationwide acclaim, Bessie Smith, through the lenses of postmodern blackness theory.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the population of the United States urbanized. During the 1920s, there was a population shift of African Americans moving from the South to the North in what became known as the Great Migration.¹ This particular era gave way to African Americans freely mobilizing geographically for the first time. The Great Migration was, according to journalist Nicholas Lemann:

“One of the largest and most rapid mass internal movements in history—perhaps the greatest not caused by the immediate threat of execution or starvation. In sheer numbers, it outranks the migration of any ethnic group—Italians or Irish or Jews or Poles—to [the United States]. For African Americans, the migration meant leaving what had always been their economic and social base in America, and finding a new one.”²

¹ Karl E. Taeuber.; Alma F. Taeuber. "The Negro Population in the United States", in Davis, John P., *The American Negro Reference Book*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall), 122.

² Nicholas Lemann. *The Promised Land; The Great Migration and How It Changed America*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf), 6.

Six million African Americans, along with Bessie Smith, would be able to cite several reasons for leaving the South. The increase of the spread of Southern racist and terrorist ideology found in Jim Crow laws, widespread lynching, and the lack of a social and economic base, created an intolerable living situation for Blacks.³ When the First World War broke out in the second decade of the twentieth century, Black workers were attracted by job opportunities in the North as presented by businessmen. The Great Migration resulted in the Harlem Renaissance, which birthed a mecca of creativity within the Black streets of New York, inspiring poets and social activists such as Langston Hughes.⁴ For the first time, Blacks experienced a vertical class mobility⁵, and entertainers during the 1910s and 1920s like Bessie Smith experienced the gains made by moving up north to cities like Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Northern and Midwestern cities were saturated with the rich culture of their newfound residents, and as African American populations increased, so too, did the recognition of African American musical styles, which were often subjugated to total ignorance from their white counterparts, an idea that is postulated by bell hooks and her theory of postmodern blackness.

Postmodern Blackness, a literary theory and historical criticism developed by Gloria Jean Watkins (better known by her penname “bell hooks,” which is lowercased on purpose) aims to pose the question as to what determines personhood by analyzing the formation and nature of the identity of African Americans in modern society.⁶ The postmodern movement, according to Hooks, is completely independent and nearly ignorant of African Americans and their culture. Hooks posits there are two African American rights groups: the essentialist and **the** nationalist.

³ Isabel Wilkerson. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. (New York: Random House Publishing).

⁴ “The Harlem Renaissance,” Encyclopedia Britannica Online, accessed April 30, 2017.

⁵ “Social Mobility,” Encyclopedia Britannica Online, accessed April 30, 2017.

⁶ Bell Hooks. *Postmodern Culture*, no. 1 (1990). <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/27283>

Essentialists believe that individual identity is the most important to uphold in a diverse society, while nationalists believe that African Americans should do all that they possibly can to assimilate into American society, becoming one with the rest of history. Hooks supports neither idea, but seeks to find a median between the two, perhaps by encouraging African Americans to make up their own ideas and form a new philosophy on how to defeat the ideas of a strictly only white postmodern ideology. The postmodern debate should be catered to allowing the voices of the Tricontinental⁷, colonized, marginalized, exploited, and oppressed to form an antithesis to what is commonly known as the master narrative. In the same way, females throughout history have been a marginalized people, and if of a minority race, they are seemingly, forever doomed to be overlooked.

Not given very many freedoms after the Civil War, African Americans could find solace knowing that they at least had the ability to express their newfound sexuality and social realities. For the first time, African Americans were given the ability to have sovereignty in sexual matters, which was a step in the right direction as compared to life during slavery and life after emancipation. Angela Davis, political activist and author of *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, argues that sexuality after emancipation could not be adequately expressed or addressed through the musical forms existing under slavery; for example, work songs and spirituals were more focused on a collective desire to end the institutional system which had enslaved them all, not individualistic, self-glorifying love. African American music before emancipation was collective, and the focus was always on

⁷Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*. (London: Routledge, 2008).
<https://books.google.com/books?id=xdK2-hpfmVYC&pg=PA5&lpg=PA5&dq=tricontinental+theory&source=bl&ots=5-e-S1LNDd&sig=--pMoJ37RXegXqBJakmt5y8C4dw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwj3t7b-5e3TAhXITCYKHcybDDYQ6AEILTAB#v=onepage&q=tricontinental%20theory&f=false>

freedom from an oppressive system.⁸ Bessie Smith is often used as a catalyst for her sexual peculiarity. At a more traditional era in America's history, Smith did not fit within the preferred confines of sexual orientation. Smith was openly bisexual. What makes blues music distinctly different from its counterpart, American popular music of the 1920s and 1930s, was that it was free to explore such areas in more detail than had been previously allowed. Blues lyrics were more provocative, sexual, and included homosexual imagery, which was mostly shunned in the American popular music sphere of the era. The real and gritty areas of love such as extramarital affairs, exploration of different sexual partners, abuse, and violence were littered in 1920s and 1930s blues music. Interestingly, it was not the men who pioneered such a musical style with such themes, but rather the women. The blues developed a tradition of openly addressing sexuality, especially for African Americans between their emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement. Emancipation had a substantial effect on the lives of African Americans, with sexuality being a very major aspect of these newfound freedoms. Richard Wright, an African American writer, made an astounding point when he described the blues and what it signified:

“Blues leads to redemption, as they constitute ‘an almost exultant affirmation of life, of love, of sex, of movement, of hope.’ No matter how repressive was the American environment, the Negro never lost faith in or doubted his deeply endemic capacity to live.”⁹

Due to the blues being seemingly more secular and more sexual, it was often banned from religious circles. Arguably, the most defined secularity of the blues was that African Americans could register sexuality as a tangible expression of freedom or the pursuit of happiness. As Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith toured, it was as if they were preaching a different kind of love, a sexual love, and a collective experience of freedom, similar to the spirituals and work songs of just a few decades prior. The focus on sexual love in blues music was quite

⁸ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998).

⁹ John McCluskey, Jr., “Two Steppin’: Richard Wright’s Encounter with Blue-Jazz,” *American Literature* 55 (October 1983), 332-44.

different than the mainstream American pop music, and it is what made African American music distinctly different from all the rest. Blues contradicted that which was American, and created an entirely new identity that African Americans could unite under, with Bessie Smith at the helm of an essentialist movement within the theory of postmodern blackness.

Though classic blues female artists like Bessie Smith and Ida Cox (who was not homosexual) presented and embodied sexualities associated with working-class black life, their music was designated as “low” culture:

“[The blues women of the 1920s were] pivotal figures in the assertion of black women’s ideas and ideals from the standpoint of the working class and the poor. It reveals their dynamic role as spokespersons and interpreters of the dreams, harsh realities, and tragicomedies of the black experience in the first three decades of this century; their role in the continuation and development of black music in America; their contributions to blues poetry and performance. Further, it expands the base of knowledge about the role of black women in the creation and development of American popular culture; illustrates their modes and means for coping successfully with gender-related discrimination and exploitation; and demonstrates an emerging model for the working woman—one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, and trend-setting.”¹⁰

Writers would also join this seemingly growing pool of sexual ambivalence. The famous poet and leader of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes, often faced firsthand abuse for his effeminacy. Though he did not disclose that he was homosexual, it was widely believed that he was, indeed, gay; however, his biographer, Arnold Rampersad, has argued that he was not homosexual, but rather asexual. Nevertheless, African Americans found a sense of freedom from questioning such aspects about their lives that—in a former era—were previously forced upon them. It has only been for the latter half of the twentieth century that writers have actually delved into the notability of black blues performers—especially women—in the 1920s.¹¹²

¹⁰ Daphne Duval Harrison, *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), p. 10.

¹¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. xiii.

The post-Civil War African American community developed a desire for and realization of need for individual partnership and freedom of expression. For the first time, African Americans were performing alone. Blues music was individual-focused, and artists accompanied themselves. The individualized version of presenting popular music forever changed African American performance culture. Understanding the gravity and the importance of blues music in the African American domain in the first quarter of the twentieth century requires one to trace the origins of such music to the plantations of the nineteenth century in the southern United States. According to Davis, with the rise of the blues there came to be a new black consciousness, which interpreted God as the opposite of the Devil, religion as the non-secular, and the secular as largely sexual. There came two new terms, “God’s music” and “the Devil’s music.” Both were rooted in spirituals and work songs from the plantation, while each had its own distinct purpose. God and Satan were treated much differently in these post-slavery communities than they are in Black religions today. God and the Devil were apparently complex characters with different powers, both of whom entered into relationships with human beings. The Devil was not as evil as he is portrayed in literature such as the Bible, but is rather a being that one can identify with, often for comic relief.¹³

Although slavery had been abolished, poverty was a way of life for “second-class” citizens like African Americans, especially in the Deep South. Chattanooga, Tennessee, was established as a small trading post in 1828, but within half a century began to prosper as a small industrial city full of the nineteenth century’s biggest transportation medium: the railroad.¹⁴ The site of several key Civil War battles, Chattanooga was also the starting point of General

¹² Cheryl Wall, “Whose Sweet Angel Child? Blues Women, Langston Hughes, and Writing During the Harlem Renaissance,” in Arnold Rampersad, *Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence*, ed. C. James Trotman (New York: Garland, 1995), p. 39.

¹³ Angela Y. Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 6.

¹⁴ Timothy Ezzell, Chattanooga. *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture*, 2009.

Sherman's famous march on Atlanta.¹⁵ Nearly half of the city was Black, and unemployment rates were high. It was here where the "Empress of the Blues," Bessie Smith, born April 15th, 1894,¹⁶¹⁷ started her journey to become one of the pivotal Black centerpieces of the 1920s, and an American icon. Smith's tumultuous life, her musical style, her sexual peculiarity, and her incredible success have continued to influence African American artists since her untimely death in 1937.

Like many lower-class African Americans, Smith was born into poverty in "a little ramshackle cabin" which was actually a small one-room wooden shack on Charles Street at the foot of Cameron Hill, an area of Chattanooga known as Blue Goose Hollow. Bessie's father was listed as a William Smith, a part-time Southern Baptist minister.¹⁸ He died when Bessie was a toddler. The oldest daughter of seven, Viola Smith, raised her younger brothers and sisters in an apartment on West Thirteenth Street in Chattanooga's Tannery Flats area. Clarence Smith, the oldest brother, worked with Viola in laundry—one of the menial labor jobs a Black woman like Bessie should have expected to devote the rest of her life to—in order to gain income for the household. Frustrated with limited employment opportunities for African Americans, Clarence left to join a traveling troupe as a comedian. Such a move may have been the reason that Bessie eventually was inspired to enter the realm of music and show business.¹⁹ With one of her

¹⁵ "Battle Summary: Chickamauga, GA." National Park Service. Accessed April 09, 2017. <http://www.nps.gov/abpp/battles/ga004.htm>.

¹⁶ *U.S. Census of Population, 1910: Heads of Families*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1910. It is unclear when Smith was born, and several sources heavily differ. According to the 1910 United States Census and, later, a marriage license from 1923, Bessie Smith may have been born on April 15th, 1894, a date that has also been provided by Smith's mother, Laura Smith, who died before Bessie was a decade old.

¹⁷ *U.S. Census of Population, 1900: Heads of Families*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1900. Smith is also cited by the 1900 census¹⁷ to have been born in July 1892, but the former birthdate of 1894 is more widely accepted.

¹⁸ Chris Albertson. *Bessie Smith: The Complete Recordings*. (New York, NY: Columbia/Legacy, 1991), 7.

¹⁹ Jackie Kay. *Bessie Smith*. (Bath: Absolute Press). 1997.

brothers, Andrew, on the guitar, Bessie took up singing on Ninth Street,²⁰ Chattanooga's equivalent to the streets of Harlem, New York, and New Orleans, Louisiana.²¹ In 1912, Smith departed Chattanooga when Clarence returned and arranged an audition for his talented sister, leading her to join the Moses Stokes Travelling Show, a travelling minstrel show.²²

Music was a way of life and a way to escape poverty in the Black community, which is something that could be said of enslaved Africans when they were unwillingly brought to the Americas. Besides their workforce, Africans brought their musical traditions with them. In the South, musical styles such as work songs and spirituals were commonplace among plantations. By the time of Smith's birth, her community's musical traditions evolved into what became known as the blues. The first form of the blues was called country blues, a combination of work songs, call and response, and folk music.²³ Due to the Great Migration, the blues also urbanized and successfully infiltrated jazz, a style the Empress of Blues would later champion, succeeding the "Mother of the Blues," Ma Rainey, and her style of vaudeville blues. Gertrude "Ma" Rainey became famous for popularizing the blues. She broke tradition and brought the blues off the Black streets of the South and into travelling shows. As the years went on, blues turned into big band, which turned into jazz, becoming rhythm and blues, then soul, and so forth, according to bassist William Price.²⁴

²⁰ In the first half of the twentieth century, Big Nine was the scene of bars and dance halls where music greats performed. Prominent performers would come and visit Chattanooga and engage in its famous clubs and nightlife. Thanks to folklorist Douglas Turner Day in the 1990s, an extensive oral history was conducted on the musicians of the Big Nine. The history of the Big Nine was rooted in segregation. In the late nineteenth century, a white planter named John Lovell set up the first tent on Ninth Street, effectively setting up the first business in the area by selling alcohol and women for pleasure. By the Roaring Twenties, the area was teeming with black elites. Ninth Street was later renamed Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. in 1981 to commemorate the slain civil rights leader.

²¹ Albertson, *Bessie Smith Recordings*, 7.

²² Kay, *Bessie Smith*, 27.

²³ "BBC – GCSE: Origins of the Blues." BBC News. Accessed April 09, 2017.
http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/music/popular_music/blues2.shtml.

²⁴ Charles J. Moss. "The Lost Music Town of Tennessee." Medium. January 09, 2015. Accessed April 02, 2017.
<https://medium.com/@charlesjmoss/the-lost-music-town-of-tennessee-2b4593a08e02>

In an era of male blues singers, females such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Mamie Smith (no relation to Bessie Smith), and Ida Cox paved the way for female blues singers throughout the 1910s and 1920s.²⁵ Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith were the women primarily responsible for the popularizing of blues throughout the eastern seaboard. Without these individuals, such a musical style could have been lost forever. In Bessie Smith's example, without music, she would have had no hope. She was poor, uneducated, and Black, the definition of a perpetual penniless life, yet her talents thrust her into a new economic class, a class in which she could not have otherwise entered. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, albeit broad, there were only two things a Black person could do: resign himself or herself to a life of horribly paid menial labor, or join a traveling minstrel show. Although traveling shows had very racist origins and continual racist undertones, they offered Blacks an escape from servitude.²⁶ Due to the influence of Ma and Pa Rainey, Smith was groomed for a life on the road. Smith was taught dance steps and performance presence that would later make her into arguably the most beloved of blues singers.

Understanding Bessie Smith's musical style, background, and freedom of expression, means comprehending the effects of music on African American culture as a whole. Jazz and blues artists like Bessie Smith traditionally differ from Europeans and Americans whose specialty is the European "classical" music and for whom freedom of expression is more likely to be limited to a plain, written score. Some African American artists like Duke Ellington concluded that Black music began as a racial expression:

"Black artists, Black musicians, dancers, and audiences laid the foundation for every form of popular music in the twentieth century. Besides shaping the music of the dance hall, record player, jukebox, radio, and night club, black musicians and audiences behaved in accordance

²⁵ Albertson, *Bessie Smith Recordings*, 7.

²⁶ Albertson, *Bessie Smith*, 25.

with Afro-American values. As we shall see, the artist who created the music stressed feeling over technique; personal commitment; freedom of expression; and the freedom of life associated with this musical world.”²⁷

Oftentimes, according to postmodern blackness theory, it is as if the voice and rich history behind such a movement has been increasingly silenced. Nationalist groups may argue that this is a positive development, as Black music has successfully infiltrated and remained the in the sphere of American popular music specifically through hip-hop, jazz, and rhythm and blues. Jazz, once cited as the end of civilization,²⁸ is now a definitive piece of American history. Bessie Smith, as popular as she became, was an African American artist by definition. She was skilled at improvisation and did not necessarily follow a primary technique. She channeled her pain, anger, sorrow, and freedom through her music, effectively creating her own unique and iconic style, bringing the blues to life from the limiting streets of the South and to the urban streets of cities such as Philadelphia and New York. Like so many African American artists, Smith embodied the humanistic and free elements in black music culture. Smith, later known to spend her money freely, valued her personal expression over money and conformity. For the sake of entertainment, artists like Smith communicated joy, sorrow, and loneliness, to make the tragedies of life tolerable.²⁹ African American blues singers not only sang to entertain, but to celebrate a collective experience of their own people, making it distinctly different from their white counterparts.

Though subjugated to a signage with a “race record” label of Columbia Records, Smith still achieved quite the success. She had relocated to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and signed a deal that catapulted her success. Regardless of her ethnicity, the 1920s opened up a new avenue

²⁷Douglas Henry, Daniels. “The Significance of Blues for American History.” *The Journal of Negro History* 70, no. 1/2 (1985): 16. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717635>.

²⁸ Nicholas M. Evans. *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism, and Modern Culture*. New York: Garland, 1999.

²⁹ Douglas Henry, Daniels. “The Significance of Blues for American History.” *The Journal of Negro History* 70, no. 1/2 (1985): 18. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717635>.

for Smith, and perhaps she could be cited as one of the first, along with Mamie Smith and her 1920 single, “Crazy Blues,”³⁰ to break the color line in the entertainment industry before Michael Jackson’s massive breakthrough in the 1980s. Smith is cited with being the most successful of any Black performer of her day, performing with the likes of Louis Armstrong and Clarence Williams. With singles like “Downhearted Blues,” “I Ain’t Gonna Play No Second Fiddle,” “Backwater Blues,” “Cold Hand Blues,” and many more, Bessie Smith earned her nickname, “Empress of the Blues,” and sold over a million records. With such hits, Smith redefined herself as more than just the successor of Ma Rainey, but rather, the epitome of a postmodern African American. No longer subjected to her previous life of poverty or an expected life of low-paid servitude, Smith found an identity as a living, breathing antithesis of a marginalized, voiceless people.

At the dawn of the Great Depression, Smith found herself dropped from her label due to a cultural and musical shift towards swing music. Smith’s lifestyle of alcoholism also proved to be malicious towards others and she was left with jobs that were few and far between. New inventions like the radio and sound movies also damaged record companies’ success at selling records, which sadly meant that Smith was eventually dropped by her label in 1931. Her leanings towards alcoholism also made it quite difficult for Smith to be successful and maintain steady employment. Whilst her performances slowed, Smith sought to join Broadway in an unsuccessful venture, as most critics cited Smith as the only good performer in the Broadway musical, *Pansy*. Smith also tried her hand at film in 1929, starring in the all-African American speakeasy film, *St. Louis Blues*, which was based on a prior hit single by W. C. Handy. Perhaps because *St. Louis Blues* is the only surviving film by Smith, and the only recording of her outside

³⁰ Gunther Schuller. *Early Jazz: Its Roots and Musical Development*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986, 226.

of the Columbia Records sphere, the film was admitted to the Library of Congress's National Film Registry, preserving it for all time.

On September 26th, 1937, Smith's comeback was permanently halted by her death in a vehicle accident.³¹ Unfortunately, the so-called Empress was lavished with an improper burial and an unmarked gravesite until 1970.³² The death of Bessie Smith has proven to be a mystery, as some have passed on the legend that Smith was denied entry into the local Mississippi hospital due to racism. Smith's death has inspired plays like Edward Albee's *The Death of Bessie Smith*.³³

Smith's memory lives on, especially with blues, swing, and jazz singers of the latter twentieth century, who have created her as a major influence on their careers. Musically, she has greatly inspired the likes of Billie Holiday, Janis Joplin, and even Aretha Franklin. Smith has also influenced legendary figures of the latter twentieth century and early twenty-first century such as Queen Latifah, who portrayed Smith in the critically acclaimed 2015 HBO film. Smith paved the way for artists to eventually step out of the closet and accept themselves in a society in which their sexual orientation may still not be accepted by the general public. Smith also inspired gay African American authors such as the legendary Langston Hughes, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka. Though Bessie Smith spent very little time in Chattanooga and it is not recorded that she ever returned after 1912, the city opened up an entire museum to her memory: The Bessie Smith Cultural Center and African American Museum Performance Hall.

³¹ Bessie Smith was thrown from the passenger seat after her companion and driver, Richard Morgan, sideswiped a truck, causing the vehicle to spiral out of control. Sadly, Smith had lost so much blood from the accident that she was unable to be saved by the local hospital. It has also been said that her arm had been partially severed in the tragic affair.

³² Janis Joplin paid for this gravesite with the epitaph: "Bessie Smith keeps singing forever." She also placed Bessie Smith's birth in 1895.

³³ Edward Albee's play focuses on one of the controversial ideas: Bessie Smith was apparently admitted to an all-White hospital in Mississippi, and they refused to treat her. This particular fable was proven false.

Bessie Smith was the “Empress of the Blues” for a clear reason. The blues represented a movement—it represented a chance for African Americans to overcome the limitations of their social and economic class and the results of their decimated history. The humanism displayed by artists such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey have continued on to reach the likes of Queen Latifah and other contemporary Black artists. Only through cooperation and not competition, humanism over materialism, freedom over uniformity, and artistic expression over mere technique can African Americans hope to finally join together in a collective struggle for unity, the perfect blend of essentialism and nationalism found within the theory of postmodern blackness. The blues, which was developed over hundreds of years by African slaves and their descendants, should be an imperative portion worth studying by scholars.³⁴ Bessie Smith’s legacy, sometimes overshadowed by her impulsive drinking, bisexuality, and indulgent spending should not negatively bias the opinions of researchers and scholars. Bessie Smith should not be allowed to fall into the black hole of obscurity that is sometimes created by those who control the master narrative. Smith is essential to understanding a double minority—she is not only a woman, but a Black woman at that. Scholars should be able to take a step back and thoroughly analyze the rise and fall of Bessie Smith. By understanding the numerous examples found in Bessie Smith’s life, can the realm of academia hope to understand the struggle and identity of African Americans of the past and be aptly prepared to share the issues of a postmodern world that is learning to highlight the marginalized subcultures of the world in the future.

³⁴ Douglas Henry, Daniels. “The Significance of Blues for American History.” *The Journal of Negro History* 70, no. 1/2 (1985): 22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717635>.

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